

WHAT IS CLAIMED IS:

1. An apparatus for disabling a telephone ringer comprising:
a light sensing device operable to produce a signal indicative of a level of ambient light; and
a controller operable to receive the signal and disable the telephone ringer when the signal indicates that the ambient light has reached a predetermined level.
2. The apparatus according to claim 1, wherein the controller is operable to disable the telephone ringer when the signal indicates that the ambient light has fallen below a predetermined threshold.
3. The apparatus according to claim 1, wherein the light sensing device is taken from the group consisting of a photovoltaic cell, a photo-transistor, and a photo-resistor.
4. The apparatus according to claim 1, wherein the light sensing device and controller are external to the telephone and the controller is operable to couple between a telephone line and an input connection of the telephone.
5. The apparatus according to claim 1, wherein the light sensing device and controller are integral with the telephone.
6. An apparatus for disabling a telephone ringer comprising:
a light sensing device operable to produce a first signal indicative of a level of ambient light;
a timing device operable to produce a second signal indicative of a timing condition; and
a controller operable to receive the first and second signals and disable the telephone ringer when either (i) the first signal indicates that the ambient light has reached a predetermined level, or (ii) the second signal indicates that a predetermined timing condition has been satisfied.
7. The apparatus according to claim 6, wherein the controller is operable to disable the telephone ringer when the first signal indicates that the ambient light has fallen below a predetermined threshold

8. The apparatus according in claim 6, wherein the light sensing device is taken from the group consisting of a photovoltaic cell, a photo-transistor, and a photo-resistor.

9. The apparatus according in claim 6, wherein the light sensing device, timing device and controller are external to the telephone and the controller is operable to couple between a telephone line and an input connection of the telephone.

10. The apparatus according in claim 6, wherein the light sensing device, timing device and controller are integral with the telephone.

11. The apparatus according to claim 6, wherein the timing device is operable to provide the second signal to the controller to indicate that the telephone ringer is to be sequentially disabled and enabled at periodic pre-set times.

12. The apparatus according to claim 6, wherein the timing device is operable to provide the second signal to the controller to indicate that the telephone ringer is to be sequentially disabled and enabled at varying times on varying days.

13. The apparatus according to claim 6, wherein the timing device is integral with the controller.

14. (Amended) An apparatus for disabling a telephone ringer comprising:
a light sensing device operable to produce a signal indicative of a predetermined level of ambient light;
a controller operable to receive [the] said signal and disable the telephone ringer when [the] said signal indicates that the ambient light has reached [a] said predetermined level; and
a recording device operable to communicate with the controller and play back a recording to a calling party when said controller has disabled said telephone ringer.

15. The apparatus according to claim 14, wherein the controller is operable to enable and disable the recording device such that the recording device may play back a recording to a calling party only when the signal indicates that the ambient light has reached the predetermined level.

16. The apparatus according to claim 14, wherein the recording device is operable to receive and retain a message from the calling party.

17. The apparatus according to claim 14, wherein the controller is operable to disable the telephone ringer when the signal indicates that the ambient light has fallen below a predetermined threshold.

18. The apparatus according in claim 14, wherein the light sensing device is taken from the group consisting of a photovoltaic cell, a photo-transistor, and a photo-resistor.

19. The apparatus according in claim 14, wherein the light sensing device, recording device and controller are external to the telephone and the controller is operable to couple between a telephone line and an input connection of the telephone.

20. The apparatus according in claim 14, wherein the light sensing device and controller are integral with the telephone.

21. An apparatus for disabling a telephone ringer comprising:

a light sensing device operable to produce a first signal indicative of a level of ambient light;

a timing device operable to produce a second signal indicative of a timing condition;

a controller operable to receive the first and second signals and disable the telephone ringer when either (i) the first signal indicates that the ambient light has reached a predetermined level, or (ii) the second signal indicates that a predetermined timing condition has been satisfied; and

a recording device operable to communicate with the controller and play back a recording to a calling party.

22. The apparatus according to claim 21, wherein the controller is operable to enable and disable the recording device such that the recording device may play back the recording to the calling part only when either (i) the first signal indicates that the ambient light has reached the predetermined level, or (ii) the second signal indicates that the predetermined timing condition has been satisfied.

23. The apparatus according to claim 21, wherein the recording device is operable to receive and retain a message from the calling party.

24. The apparatus according to claim 21, wherein the controller is operable to disable the telephone ringer when the first signal indicates that the ambient light has fallen below a predetermined threshold.

25. The apparatus according in claim 21, wherein the light sensing device is taken from the group consisting of a photovoltaic cell, a photo-transistor, and a photo-resistor.

26. The apparatus according in claim 21, wherein the light sensing device, timing device and controller are external to the telephone and the controller is operable to couple between a telephone line and an input connection of the telephone.

27. The apparatus according in claim 21, wherein the light sensing device, timing device and controller are integral with the telephone.

28. The apparatus according to claim 21, wherein the timing device is operable to provide the second signal to the controller to indicate that the telephone ringer is to be sequentially disabled and enabled at periodic pre-set-times.

29. The apparatus according to claim 21, wherein the timing device is operable to provide the second signal to the controller to indicate that the telephone ringer is to be sequentially disabled and enabled at varying times on varying days.

30. The apparatus according to claim 21, wherein the timing device is integral with the controller.

31. An apparatus for disabling a telephone ringer comprising:

a light sensing device operable to produce a signal indicative of a level of ambient light;

a recording device operable to play back a recording to a calling party, the recording prompting the calling party to provide indicia that the call is a priority call; and

a controller communicating with the light sensing device and the recording device, the controller being operable to receive the signal and both (i) to disable the telephone ringer, and (ii) enable the recording device such that the recording device may play back the recording to the calling party, when the signal indicates that the ambient light has reached a predetermined level. the controller being operable to initiate an emergency sequence when the indicia indicates that the call is a priority call.

32. The apparatus according to claim 31, wherein the emergency sequence includes enabling the telephone ringer irrespective of whether the signal indicates that the ambient light has reached the predetermined level.

33. The apparatus according to claim 31, further comprising an alert device in communication with the controller, the controller activating the alert device when the indicia indicates that the call is a priority call.

34. The apparatus according to claim 31, wherein the recording prompts the calling party to press a telephone keypad button to indicate that the call is a priority call, the controller being operable to recognize the pressed telephone keypad button such that the emergency sequence is initiated.

35. The apparatus according to claim 31, wherein the recording device is operable to receive and retain a message from the calling party.

36. The apparatus according to claim 31, wherein the controller is operable to disable the telephone ringer and enable the recording device when the signal indicates that the ambient light has fallen below a predetermined threshold.

37. The apparatus according in claim 31, wherein the light sensing device is taken from the group consisting of a photovoltaic cell, a photo-transistor, and a photo-resistor.

38. The apparatus according in claim 31, wherein the light sensing device, recording device and controller are external to the telephone and the controller is operable to couple between a telephone line and an input connection of the telephone.

39. The apparatus according in claim 31, wherein the light sensing device and controller are integral with the telephone.

40. An apparatus for disabling a telephone ringer comprising:

 a light sensing device operable to produce a first signal indicative of a level of ambient light;

 a timing-device operable to produce a second signal indicative of a timing condition;

 a recording device operable to play back a recording to a calling party, the recording prompting the calling party to provide indicia that the call is a priority call; and

a controller communicating with the light sensing device, the timing device and the recording device, the controller being operable to receive the first and second signals and both (i) disable the telephone ringer, and (ii) enable the recording device such that the recording device may play back the recording to the calling party, when either (i) the first signal indicates that the ambient light has reached a predetermined level, or (ii) the second signal indicates that a predetermined timing condition has been satisfied, the controller being operable to initiate an emergency sequence when the indicia indicates that the call is a priority call.

41. The apparatus according to claim 40, wherein the emergency sequence includes enabling the telephone ringer irrespective of whether either of the first and second signals indicates that the telephone ringer should be disabled.

42. The apparatus according to claim 40, further comprising an alert device in communication with the controller, the controller activating the alert device when the indicia indicates that the call is a priority call.

43. The apparatus according to claim 40, wherein the recording prompts the calling party to press a telephone keypad button to indicate that the call is a priority call, the controller being operable to recognize the pressed telephone keypad button such that the emergency sequence is initiated.

44. The apparatus according to claim 40, wherein the recording device is operable to receive and retain a message from the calling party.

45. The apparatus according to claim 40, wherein the controller is operable to disable the telephone ringer and enable the recording device when the signal indicates that the ambient light has fallen below a predetermined threshold.

46. The apparatus according to claim 40, wherein the light sensing device is taken from the group consisting of a photovoltaic cell, a photo-transistor, and a photo-resistor.

47. The apparatus according to claim 40, wherein the light sensing device, timing device, recording device and controller are external to the telephone and the controller is operable to couple between a telephone line and an input connection of the telephone.

48. The apparatus according in claim 40, wherein the light sensing device, timing device and controller are integral with the telephone.

49. The apparatus according to claim 40, wherein the timing device is operable to provide the second signal to the controller to indicate that the telephone ringer is to be sequentially disabled and enabled at periodic pre-set times.

50. The apparatus according to claim 40, wherein the timing device is operable to provide the second signal to the controller to indicate that the telephone ringer is to be sequentially disabled and enabled at varying times on varying days.

51. The apparatus according to claim 40, wherein the timing device is integral with the controller.